INDIAN SEALS

(PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS)

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA

INDIAN SEALS (PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS)

Editor : K. D. Bhargava



NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA MINISTRY OF EDUCATION GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

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PREFACE

Among the primary sources of Indian history seals have not received the attention they deserve. No systematic work has been done on the subject so far and no steps have been taken for their preservation on scientific lines. In order to fill this lacuna the National Archives of India has embarked upon a new Project of Cataloguing the Oriental Seals found on original documents in its custody. This pioneering venture, which has been undertaken by the Oriental Records Division under the guidance of my colleague Shri A. I. Tirmizi, Assistant Director of Archives, will, it is hoped, open up new vistas of research.

Apart from the seals in the custody of this Department, quite a large number of them are found either in various official repositories of records or in private custody where they suffer from various forms of decay. If early steps are not taken to preserve them scientifically, it is feared that they will be lost to posterity, leaving a big gap in the history of our country. It is, therefore, necessary that those who are entrusted with the custody of seals should be conscious of their value and familiar with the methods of their preservation.

With the above object in view Shri Tirmizi contributed a series of two articles, viz., (1) A Saga of Indian Seals and (2) Problems of Sigillography in India. The first article, which gives a general survey of Indian scals, was published in the March of India, July, 1959. The second dealing with the problems of Indian scals has been included in the Indian Archives, January—December, 1957. These articles serve not only as a pointer in that direction but provide the students of Indian sigillography with an essential tool for their task. In view of their importance and utility they are now reprinted in the form of a brochure.

Our thanks are due to the Director, Publications Division, Government of India, for permission to reproduce one of the articles which appeared in the March of India.

National Archives of India, New Delhi, 21 September, 1959.

K. D. Bhargaya Director of Archives, Government of India.

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A SAGA OF INDIAN SEALS

Of the few primary sources of Indian history, seals provide a fascinating subject of study. Right from the second millennium B.C., to which the Indus valley civilisation belongs, down to the British times seals have been used by kings, queens, princes, high-placed officers and private individuals as well as by governments and institutions to lend authority to documents and correspondence. In ancient and mediaeval India seal was considered even more important than signature for giving validity to a document. Although in modern times their importance has waned, seals continue to be used to give official contracts and communications authenticity and legal validity.

Ancient Seals.—The practice of using signet-rings emblematic of love, power and sovereignty can be traced back to remote antiquity. In Indian mythology Rama is reported to have sent his anguliyakam (signet-ring) incised with the letters of his name, to Sita. In the Shakuntala, Kalidasa has made a dexterous use of the signet-ring of king Dushyanta who having forgotten his wife, Shakuntala, recognised her only after his memory was evoked by the sight of the ring which he had given her, with his name engraved on it, as a token of love. The plot of Visakhadatta's Mudra-rakshasa

(Rakshasa's seal) hinges upon the signet-ring of Rakshasa, fugitive minister of the last Nanda king. Similarly we are told by Bana that when Harshavardhana was about to march against the king of Gauda the gramakshapatalika (keeper of the village records) requested the king to issue orders for the day and presented a golden mudra (matrix) having the device of a bull. When Hiuen Tsiang, the Chinese pilgrim, took leave of Harshavardhana, the latter furnished him with letters written on fine white cotton stuff and authenticated by impressions of his seal made of red wax.

Not only do we have references to the practice of using seals but actual specimens of ancient Indian matrices and signet-rings have come down to us. Scalstamps bearing legends as well as devices were discovered at Harappa. While legends on them have not yet been deciphered, the devices which they bear have life-like pictures of animals like lion, tiger, elephant, bear, deer and bull. While these scal-stamps are unilingual one having its legend in three different characters-Brahmi, Kharoshti and Greek-has also survived. In the line of signet-rings we have an actual specimen made of copper or bronze ascribed to the fourth century of the Christian era. This signet-ring of Maharaja Mahesvaranaga, the son of Nagabhata, is oval in shape and has both legend and device sunk in the surface of the signet. We have not only the specimens of seal-matrices and signet-rings but seal-impressions also have been discovered. The early Indian seals are found on clay.

While Buddhist votive tablets are the best examples of inscribed tablets they cannot technically be called seals. But the clay tablets having either device or legend can be called clay-seals and various archaeological sites abound in them. A large collection of such seals referable to fourth and fifth centuries A.D., were found at Basarh in Muzaffarpur District. This collection consists of seals of officials, corporations, guilds, temples, private individuals etc. Besides clay, copper was also used for sealing purposes and such seals are found on tamra-sasana (copper-plate grants). They are of various sizes and shapes, viz., circular, oval, leafshaped etc. The earlier copper seals are simple and contain an emblem or two, forming the royal insignia or the coat of arms. The principal device was lanchhans (crest) which was used on coins also. This usually took the form of a lion, a tiger, an elephant, a bull, a bear, a fish, a serpent, the bird-man Garuda, the monkey-god Hanuman etc. Besides such figures there are also engraved lamp-stands, chhairs (parasol). the sun and the crescent moon. The legend which is sometimes composed in verse contains the name of the ruler along with that of his father.

The seal of Kantideva (Pl. I—No. I), which looks like an inverted leaf, is supported by two figures of serpents whose interlaced tails are soldered to the bottom of the seal while their hoods are raised. The seal proper is divided into two panels. While the lower panel bears the legend Sri Kantideva, the upper one bears the figure of a lion scated in a temple. But a more end end expande sport to the telegral stands that it to the more end of a subdisconductor. The matter the Concept form. The most concept to seat form.

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Scals of the Company For about two centuries after its establishment the East Inc. a Company acted in the name of the Mugha. Emperor Even in the first two decades of the nuncteenth century it did not claim sovereignty authough by that time it had emerged as a great political power. The Governor-General like other subabdars had his own seal but described him self as the servant of the Mugha. Emperor He followed the convention of other Indian chiefs and had a

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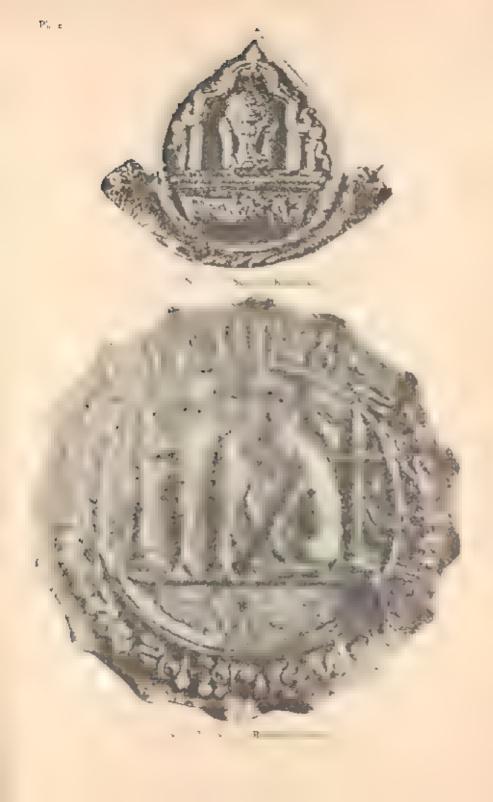
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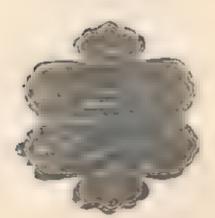
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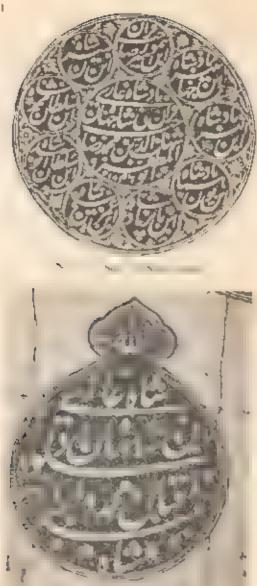


Prate II





No. 4. Scal of Nur Jahan



No. 6. Seal of Data Shukoh







No. 9. Seal of Kamaleshwari Devi



No. 10. Scal of Braja Nath Sinha



No. 11. Scal of Marquis of Hastings



No. 12. Scal of Lord Berlinck



No. 13. Pendant Seal of R. Christian VIII L27Edu.—1,000—19-2-50. GHF.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF INDIA MENSTRY OF EDUCATION GOVERNMENT OF INDIA